

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

INFO OCT-01 EUR-12 ISO-00 HA-05 CIAE-00 COME-00 EB-08
INR-10 LAB-04 NSAE-00 SIL-01 DODE-00 PM-05 H-01
L-03 NSC-05 PA-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 TRSE-00
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FM AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI
TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9758
INFO AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
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AMEMBASSY KABUL
AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU
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AMEMBASSY TEHRAN
AMCONSUL BOMBAY
AMCONSUL CALUCTTA
AMCONSUL MADRAS
CINCPAC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 3 NEW DELHI 3036

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT, IN
SUBJECT: ASSEMBLY ELECTION SCENE ON EVE OF POLLING: STILL MURKY

REF: NEW DELHI 2619

SUMMARY: FIVE STATES AND ONE UNION TERRITORY GO TO THE POLLS
TOMORROW (FEBRUARY 25) TO ELECT LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLIES FOLLOWING
A CAMPAIGN WHICH HAS GENERATED LITTLE POPULAR ENTHUSIASM. LEADERS
OF THE THREE MAJOR CONTENDING PARTIES, THE JANATA, CONGRESS (R)
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AND CONGRESS (8), CONTINUED THEIR ACTIVE CAMPAIGNING DURING THE
FINAL WEEK AND THEIR RHETORIC FOLLOWED THE THEMES CITED IN REFTTEL.
NO NEW ISSUES OR DEVELOPMENTS HAVE ARISEN. NATIONAL AND FOREIGN
POLICY ISSUES CONTINUE TO PLAY A MINOR ROLE. LOCAL ISSUES AND
PERSONALITIES, AS WELL AS CASTE CONSIDERATIONS, ARE LIKELY TO BE
AT LEAST AS IMPORTANT ON BALLOTING DAY AS PARTY LABELS. THE
CAMPAIGN HAS BEEN GENERALLY ORDERLY AND THE POLLING IS EXPECTED

TO BE LIKEWISE. THE ELECTORAL PICTURE REMAINS CLOUDED AND
CONFUSED BY THE PREVALENCE OF THREE-WAY CONTESTS BETWEEN THE
MAJOR PARTIES ALMOST EVERYWHERE, THE UNCERTAIN APPEAL OF
INDEPENDENTS, AND THE ABSENCE OF BURNING NATIONAL ISSUES. ALL
THREE PARTIES RECOGNIZE THAT THE STAKES ARE HIGH, BUT THEIR
PREDICTIONS OF THE OUTCOME LACK CONVICTION. EVEN SEASONED
OBSERVERS ARE RELUCTANT TO MAKE FORECASTS. IF, AS SOME
COMMENTATORS SPECULATE, NO PARTY WINS A CLEAR MAJORITY IN SOME
OF THE STATES, THERE MAY BE A PROLONGED PERIOD OF POST-ELECTORAL
INSTABILITY AS REALIGNMENTS AND ADJUSTMENTS ARE WORKED OUT. WE
CONTINUE TO SHARE THE VIEW OF MANY OBSERVERS HERE THAT THESE
ELECTIONS WILL HAVE CONSIDERABLE IMPACT ON THE FUTURE COURSE OF
INDIAN NATIONAL POLITICS. THIS MESSAGE DRAWS UPON REPORTING
FROM THE THREE CONGENS. END SUMMARY.

1. CAMPAIGNING ENDED FEBRUARY 23 FOR THE STATE ASSEMBLY
ELECTIONS IN FIVE STATES AND ONE UNION TERRITORY. ALL BALLOTING
WILL BE HELD ON FEBRUARY 25, BUT FIRST RESULTS WILL NOT BE KNOWN
UNTIL FEBRUARY 27 AT THE EARLIEST. JUDGING FROM REPORTS FROM THE
CONGENS, NO NEW DEVELOPMENTS OR ISSUES HAVE ARISEN IN THE
ELECTIONEERING SINCE OUR LAST WRAP-UP (REFTEL). IN GENERAL,
THE CAMPAIGN SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN LOW-KEY AND LACKING IN POPULAR
ENTHUSIASM. (THIS MAY BE THE RESULT OF MEASURING THE PRESENT
ELECTIONS AGAINST THE STANDARD SET BY THE LOK SABHA POLL THIS
TIME LAST YEAR.) ONE EXCEPTION TO THIS PATTERN IS ASSAM, WHERE
VOTER INTEREST IS REPORTED TO BE HIGH. IN ADDITION, CERTAIN
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KEY CONTESTS INVOLVING PROMINENT FIGURES (E.G., FORMER CHIEF
MINISTER DEVRAJ URS IN KARNATAKA) HAVE BECOME HEATED. OVERALL,
HOWEVER, NO "WAVES" ARE EVIDENT AND VOTERS SEEM TO BE APATHETIC
AND BEWILDERED BY THE MULTIPLICITY OF CANDIDATES AND THE LACK OF
A CLEAR CHOICE AMONG THE CONTESTANTS OF THE THREE MAJOR PARTIES.

2. EACH OF THE CONTENDING PARTIES SUFFERS ITS SHARE OF HANDICAPS.
ALL THREE PARTIES SEEM TO BE SHORT OF FUNDS. JANATA HAS A LARGE
AND ATTRACTIVE STABLE OF NATIONAL LEADERS TO SEND OUT ON THE
HUSTINGS, BUT IT LACKS ORGANIZATIONAL MACHINERY IN MANY AREAS.
CONGRESS (R) HAS MAINTAINED ITS ORGANIZATION (PARTICULARLY IN
MAHARASHTRA) AND HAS THE ADDITIONAL ADVANTAGE OF RUNNING ITS
NOMINEES UNDER THE COW-AND-CALF ELECTION SYMBOL. BUT THE REDDY/
CHAVAN CONGRESS IS SHORT OF NATIONALLY-RECOGNIZED LEADERS.
Y.B. CHAVAN, WHO IS NOT A NOTABLE CROWD-PLEASER, HAD HAD TO DO
THE BULK OF THE CAMPAIGNING FOR THE PARTY, SINCE STATE-LEVEL
CONGRESS (R) LEADERS SEEM MORE CONCERNED WITH WINNING IN THEIR
OWN CONSTITUENCIES. MRS. GANDHI'S CONGRESS LKIL LACKS ORGANIZATION
IN MANY REGIONS AND IT IS NOT CLEAR TO WHAT EXTENT HER UPRaised
"HAND" ELECTION SYMBOL HAS ACHIEVED POPULAR RECOGNITION. STILL,
MRS. GANDHI'S CHARISMA REMAINS HER PARTY'S MOST IMPORTANT
(AND INTANGIBLE) ASSET. IN SOME STATES, BICKERING WITHIN THE

THREE MAJOR PARTIES HAS HAMPERED THEIR CAMPAIGNING. RESENTMENT
OVER THE CANDIDATE SELECTION PROCESS (WHEREIN MANY PARTY
TICKETS WERE GIVEN TO RECENT CONGRESS DEFECTORS) CONTINUES TO
BEDEVIL THE JANATA IN MOST STATES,

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PARTICULARLY ANDHRA PRADESH. IN MAHARASHTRA EACH OF THE
JANATA'S CONSTITUENT ELEMENTS HAS BASICALLY CAMPAIGNED FOR ITS
OWN CANDIDATES. EVEN THE TWO CONGRESS PARTIES HAVE SUFFERED
FROM VARYING DEGREES OF INTERNAL SQUABBLING OVER THE
DISTRIBUTION OF PARTY TICKETS. ALL PARTIES SEEM TO SUFFER FROM
THE INABILITY TO STAKE OUT CLEAR POSITIONS WHICH WOULD
DISTINGUISH THEM FROM THE OTHER CONTENDERS. MUCH OF THIS DERIVES
FROM THE FACT THAT SOME MANY CANDIDATES OF THE THREE PARTIES WERE
UNTIL RECENTLY MEMBERS OF CONGRESS. IT IS DIFFICULT TO
ASSESS HOW THESE VARIOUS PLUSES AND MINUSES FOR EACH OF THE
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CONTENDERS WILL ULTIMATELY AFFECT THE OUTCOME. IN ADDITION, THE PRESENCE OF SO MANY INDEPENDENTS AND MINOR PARTY CANDIDATES IN INDIVIDUAL CONTESTS REMAINS AN IMPONDERABLE FACTOR.

3. NATIONAL PARTY LEADERS CONTINUED THEIR VIGOROUS TOURING IN THE FINAL WEEK OF THE CAMPAIGN, AND THEIR SPEECHES WENT OVER THE FAMILIAR GROUND REPORTED IN REFTEL. JANATA MOUNTED A HIGH-PRESSURE EFFORT IN KARNATAKA, JUDGING FROM THE ARRAY OF BIG GUNS WHO HAVE BEEN FIRING AWAY AROUND THE STATE. PRIME MINISTER DESAI HAS BEEN ON THE CIRCUIT MOST OF THE TIME AND ADDRESSED WHAT WAS DESCRIBED AS A "MAMMOTH" PUBLIC RALLY IN BOMBAY FEBRUARY 20 (HIS FIRST AT THE CITY'S FAMOUS CHOWPATTY MEETING GROUNDS SINCE BECOMING PM). JANATA FIGURES ARE REPORTEDLY DRAWING GOOD CROWDS IN MANY AREAS AND ARE HAVING AN IMPACT ON THEIR AUDIENCES. FOREIGN MINISTER VAJPAYEE, A SUPERB ORATOR, HAS EMERGED AS ONE OF JANATA'S MOST EFFECTIVE CROWD-PLEASERS. CONGRESS (R), LACKING CHARISMATIC LEADERS, HAS BEEN CONDUCTING A MORE SUBDUED CAMPAIGN AND MAY HOPE THAT ITS ORGANIZATION WILL COMPENSATE FOR THIS DEFICIENCY. BY ALL ACCOUNTS, MRS. GANDHI CONTINUES TO DRAW BY FAR THE LARGEST CROWDS ON HER WHIRLWIND TOURS. REPORTS DIFFER, HOWEVER, ON THE DEGREE OF ENTHUSIASM WHICH SHE GENERATES. JANATA AND CONGRESS (R) LEADERS CLAIM THAT AUDIENCES COME TO HER RALLIES OUT OF "CURIOSITY", JUST TO GET A LOOK AT THE FALLEN LEADER. CAMPAIGN RHETORIC FOLLOWS FAMILIAR THEMES. ONE POTENTIALLY PERSUASIVE ARGUMENT EMPLOYED BY THE JANATA HAS BEEN TO STRESS THE USEFULNESS OF ALIGNING THE STATE GOVERNMENTS WITH THE PARTY IN POWER AT THE CENTER.

4. LOCAL ISSUES DOMINATED THE CAMPAIGN DOWN TO THE END. THESE, ALONG WITH THE LOCAL PERSONALITIES AND TRADITIONAL CASTE, ETHNIC AND COMMUNAL CONSIDERATIONS, ARE LIKELY TO BE AT LEAST AS IMPORTANT ON POLLING DAY AS PARTY LABELS AND IDEOLOGIES -- PARTICULARLY GIVEN THE COMMON CONGRESS BACKGROUND FROM WHICH SO
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MANY CANDIDATES ARE DERIVED. INsofar AS A "NATIONAL ISSUE" HAS EMERGED AT ALL, IT IS PROBABLY MRS. GANDHI HERSELF. THE EMERGENCY AND HER ROLE IN IT INVARIABLY ARE PROMINENT THEMES IN THE SPEECHES OF LEADING FIGURES, WITH MRS. GANDHI VIGOROUSLY DEFENDING IT AGAINST CONGRESS (R) AND JANATA CRITICISM.

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5. FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES CONTINUE TO RECEIVE RELATIVELY LITTLE ATTENTION. ONLY VAJPAYEE, IN EXPLAINING JANATA'S FOREIGN POLICY, AND MRS. GANDHI IN ATTACKING IT, HAVE RAISED THE ISSUE TO ANY GREAT EXTENT. BUT SUCH EXCHANGES WILL HAVE LITTLE IMPACT ON A LARGELY RURAL AND PAROCHIAL ELECTORATE.

6. THE CONGENS REPORT THAT LAW AND ORDER HAS NOT BEEN A PROBLEM DURING THE CAMPAIGN, ALTHOUGH MRS. GANDHI HAS SOUGHT TO MAKE IT AN ISSUE BY ALLEGING NUMEROUS ATTACKS ON HARIJANS AND THE "WEAKER SECTIONS" UNDER THE JANATA GOVERNMENT. SOME ELDCTION
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RALLIES OF MRS. GANDHI AND HER LIEUTENANTS HAVE BEEN MARKED BY STONE-THROWING AND SLOGAN-SHOUTING INCIDENTS, WHICH SHE HAS TRIED TO EXPLOIT. ON THE OTHER SIDE, JANATA PARTY PRESIDENT CHANDRA SHEKHAR WAS INJURED BY A ROCK AT ONE MEETING. OVERALL,

HOWEVER, THE CAMPAIGN HAS BEEN GENERALLY ORDERLY AND THE GENERAL EXPECTATION IS THAT THE BALLOTING WILL BE LIKEWISE.

7. ON THE EVE OF BALLOTING DAY, THE ELECTORAL PICTURE REMAINS CLOUDED AND CONFUSED BY THE PREVALENCE OF THREE-WAY CONTESTS BETWEEN THE MAJOR PARTIES ALMOST EVERYWHERE, THE UNCERTAIN APPEAL OF INDEPENDENTS, AND THE ABSENCE OF BURNING NATIONAL ISSUES. ALL THREE MAJOR CONTENDERS EVIDENTLY RECOGNIZE THAT MUCH IS AT STAKE IN THESE ELECTIONS. PARTY SPOKESMEN MAKE THE RITUALISTIC PREDICTIONS OF THE OUTCOME, BUT THEIR FORECASTS GENERALLY LACK CONFIDENCE AND CONVICTION. CERTAINLY, NO SEASONED OBSERVER IS WILLING FIRMLY TO PREDICT THE RESULTS WITH ANYTHING APPROACHING FINALITY. AT BEST, FORECASTERS SAY THAT ONE PARTY OR ANOTHER "MAY" HAVE AN "EDGE" IN A PARTICULAR AREA, BUT HASTILY ADD THAT INNUMERABLE IMPONDERABLES COULD UPSET THE EQUATION.

8. GIVEN THE GENERAL FEELING THAT NO PARTY MAY WIN A CLEAR MAJORITY IN SOME OF THE STATES, ATTENTION IS INCREASINGLY FOCUSSED ON POST-ELECTORAL REALIGNMENTS AND ADJUSTMENTS. WORKING ON THIS ASSUMPTION, OBSERVERS HAVE SPECULATED ON SEVERAL POSSIBLE SCENARIOS ONCE THE VOTES ARE COUNTED: IF THE JANATA AND CONGRESS (R) EMERGE IN A ONE-TWO LINEUP (BUT NEITHER WITH A MAJORITY) THEY COULD JOIN TO FORM A COALITION GOVERNMENT, BASED ON JOINT OPPOSITION TO MRS. GANDHI. SUCH A DEVELOPMENT COULD OCCUR IN MAHARASHTRA, ANDHRA AND KARNATAKA; IN THESE STATES, THE LARGE NUMBERS OF FORMER CONGRESSMEN RUNNING ON THE JANATA TICKET COULD EASE THE WAY FOR SUCH AN ALIGNMENT. ANOTHER SCENARIO POSTULATES THAT WHICHEVER PARTY WINS THE LARGEST NUMBER OF SEATS (BUT WITHOUT GAINING A MAJORITY) WILL QUICKLY ATTRACT

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ENOUGH INDEPENDENTS AND DEFECTORS FROM THE OTHER PARTIES TO ESTABLISH A STABLE GOVERNMENT. THIS LINE OF SPECULATION GAINS ADDED CREDENCE FROM THE WIDESPREAD BELIEF THAT THE IDEOLOGICAL MOORINGS OF MANY CANDIDATES ARE MINIMAL AND THAT PARTY LABELS CAN BE PAINLESSLY SWITCHED GIVEN THE PROPER INCENTIVES, WHICH IN THIS CASE WOULD BE A SHARE OF POWER. MANY WINNING CANDIDATES MAY NOT SHOW THEIR TRUE STRIPES UNTIL THE DUST HAS SETTLED. THERE IS NO GUARANTEE THAT IN EITHER SCENARIO A STABLE, WORKING GOVERNMENT COULD BE FORMED QUICKLY. MANY COMMENTATORS ARE PREDICTING A PROLONGED PERIOD OF INSTABILITY IN SOME STATES AFTER THE VOTES ARE COUNTED.

9. WE WILL PROMPTLY REPORT THE ELECTION RESULTS AND THE POLITICAL DEVELOPMENTS WHICH FOLLOW. WE CONTINUE TO SHARE THE VIEW OF MANY OBSERVERS THAT THESE ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS COULD HAVE CONSIDERABLE IMPACT ON THE FUTURE COURSE OF INDIAN NATIONAL POLITICS AND WE WILL BE LOOKING AT THE OUTCOME PRIMARILY IN THIS CONTEXT.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS, ELECTION CAMPAIGNS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 24 feb 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978NEWDE03036
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780087-0318
Format: TEL
From: NEW DELHI
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780217/aaaaansp.tel
Line Count: 332
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
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Message ID: 9ec738d0-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION NEA
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 7
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 78 NEW DELHI 2619
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 06 may 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3487534
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: ASSEMBLY ELECTION SCENE ON EVE OF POLLING: STILL MURKY
TAGS: PINT, IN
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odb://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/9ec738d0-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014